

film/video column submitted to
Dialogue: An Art Journal
20 MAR 88 FOR MAY/JUN 88 ISSUE

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Film and Video

Looking Askance

by Chuck Kleinhans

It's easy to point to the relative neglect of the work of midwestern women media artists by the coastal art press. But to recognize a shared omission does not imply a shared sensibility. There isn't a regional midwest style or subject matter that could be easily identified, whatever clusters of intent can be found here and there. But there is a certain kind of social satire based in a diversely modulated irony that characterizes much of the best recent work.

A good example is Chicagoan Donna Kennedy's sharply witty short video, *Good Catholic Girls*, in which a pair of female voices recite, echoing confessional and prayer, the impossible realities of living up to the ideological model. While the visuals process and repeat home movies of the girls situated by the camera gaze, the tape rehearses again and again the knotting of femininity into a double bind.

Another glance askance at patriarchy, Lilly Boruzskowski's film, *One For Every Month*, displays a cozy kitchen which slowly fills with a dozen women, who appear one by one in the space putting *Playboy* centerfolds into good domestic use, such as lining a birdcage, diapering an infant, etc. The deadpan humor depends on the slow accumulation of women in the kitchen, making it seem as if a determined small platoon of household workers could transform Hefner's slick sexual imagery into a female use value.

A whacky and uproarious depiction of dominant institutions is offered in *June Brides* by Cathy Cook and Claudia Looze from Milwaukee. A pair of bride-filmmakers have wild adventures while careening through the expected situations of wedding activities, which includes the women zipping around on riding lawn mowers while in full white gown regalia, turning each tradition into new opportunity for put on. The film plays with sets, performance, animation, and video to produce a funny celebration of the silly and human dimensions of nuptial occasions while relentlessly putting aside the official bridal magazine script of the events.

June Brides and *One For Every Month* hold out the hope of female transformation or appropriation of the dominant culture. Other makers seem much less optimistic about progressive possibilities, but it is significant that increasingly some women artists have turned their attention to frankly looking at men, trying to examine, rather than avoid or assume, knowledge of the masculine. Ann Alter's short film, *See Dick Run*, made at Ohio University takes a jaundiced and annoyed look at men, particularly in the crotch zone. While intended as smart satire, it sometimes falters as when shots which are supposed to expose men's cocks to the same objectification that women's routinely receive end up restating a fascination with the penis, albeit looking askew.

Texan Roberta Hammond avoids the problem in her fascinating tape of a gathering of sexually experienced heterosexual women, *Dick Talk*. The camera moves around the coffee klatch setting showing the participants, but never providing a face, while the conversation gets down to business fast: length, size, action, and ability to maintain an erection are all hashed over in frank, and usually funny monologues and exchanges. The early feminist form of the consciousness raising group discussion appears updated in this sometimes rambling, but always clever tape. Yet the obsession with penis as vaginal penetrator seems almost relentlessly a certain kind of heterosexuality, rather than simple a more general female oriented sexuality.

The latter is more the concern of Carol Porter's tape *Probe*, in which a similar group of women gather to discuss sexual pleasure, but in the context of masturbation, vibrators, and other stimulants. The camera avoids faces, and makes some hilarious pans over a coffee table full of dildoes, gadgets, and toys. At the same time it validates celibacy, self pleasuring in and out of a relationship, and thoughtful reflection on the uses and pleasures of orgasm.

Transgressing everyday ideologies, ironic awareness of the dominant culture gives women media makers the opportunity to mock and reprove an order of things that resists change, while pointing continuously at the necessity of that change.

End

Chuck Kleinhans recently taught a course on sexual representation in the media at Northwestern University